

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, April 12, 2015

Acts 4:32-35

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to

him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Let us pray....Amen

Don't you think it would be hard to be afraid of someone who greeted you with the phrase 'Peace be with you'? I do. The disciples had heard of Jesus' resurrection, they apparently got some of the terror that Mary, Salome, and Mary brought back with them from the tomb, and they were afraid of the church authorities.

With the door locked, they gathered, perhaps to discuss what had happened, to console each other, maybe to discuss what they should do next. And in their midst, Jesus just appeared. His first words: Peace be with you. He showed them his hands, pierced by the nails, and he showed them his side, opened by the spear, and he said it again: Peace be with you.

And the disciples rejoiced, because they knew it was Jesus, and that he had risen from death, and that he had come in peace.

They must have been spell-bound, dumb-founded, shocked. The disciples couldn't have been more ready to receive Christ's words than that very moment. So what Jesus said when he first appeared to the disciples after his resurrection can be considered pretty important, wouldn't you say?

And when Jesus says anything twice, it's pretty important. He said Peace be with you twice in this passage. Jesus *really* wanted peace to be with the disciples!

Jesus then explained the important truth that just as God had sent him, Jesus now sends the disciples. A sacred sending into the world.

Then Jesus breathed on them, and told them to receive the Holy Spirit. This is very interesting, because the Greek word for breath of life is Pneuma, and it also means soul or spirit. Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, equipping them for the next important truth. What truth is that, you ask? That when they forgive someone, that person will be forgiven. But when they retain the sins of another, those sins are retained, meaning they are not forgiven.

On the evening of the day Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared in the midst of the disciples in spite of a locked door. And he gave them two commandments and two truths. Each commandment seems to pave the way for each truth. He commands that peace be with the disciples, then explains that just as God has sent Jesus, Jesus sends the disciples. Then he commands that they receive the Holy Spirit, and tells the disciples that if they forgive anyone their sins, those sins are forgiven, but if they retain the sins of anyone, those sins will be retained, a grudge will be held, and they will not be forgiven.

Jesus' first act as our resurrected Lord and Savior is to command peace and the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, and to let them know that they are being sent into the world with a sacred mandate, with the power to forgive or retain the sins of others.

And so I say to you this glorious spring morning: Peace be with you! And having said that, I now must share with you a basic truth about our faith: Jesus did not just send the disciples into the world with the power to forgive. Just as God sent Jesus, Jesus sends *us*. And so, when we forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven. And when we hold a grudge against someone, those sins are retained, not just by them, but by us.

As Christians, who follow Jesus on the Way, we are sent into this world to be agents of forgiveness. And after hearing this gospel truth, we know that we have the power to forgive others. We also know, as modern day dwellers, what happens to a person when they hold a grudge: the very act of retaining the sins of another causes Peace to slip away, causes the Holy Spirit, the breath of life, to vanish, leaving mostly pain behind. The consequence to not forgiving another's sins falls on our own souls.

I have several examples from my own life, and I'm fairly certain each of you has an example as well: when we hold onto grudges, it's like squeezing a stick wrapped in barbed wire, the harder we squeeze, the more it hurts, the more it cuts, the more we bleed. It's no coincidence that Jesus chose to share this truth with the disciples so soon after his resurrection, it's a fundamental concept in our faith process.

And just as we have examples of painful grudges we have retained, we all have examples of times when we were able to forgive, to let go, and feel the relief that comes with forgiving another.

These revelations from John's gospel can have an immediate impact on our personal lives, but even more importantly, they can have an impact on our lives in the greater community. If we allow peace to be with us, and if we allow ourselves to receive the Holy Spirit, we can be the designated 'forgivers' of the world. That's our sacred commission: equipped with peace and the Holy Spirit, Christians are commissioned to go around forgiving people of their sins, knowing full well the consequences if we do not.

So what happened? Where did we go wrong? How did we stumble off the path? When did we become the defenders of the faith, the punishers of sinners, the pointers of fingers, the judge and jury of others when it comes to their own faith practices, their own mistakes, their own sins?

Does the story in John's gospel equip us and command us to expose others for their faults and sins?

Does Jesus authorize the disciples, and us, to judge others as unworthy, and then give us permission to punish them for it?

I don't think so. So why do we do it? Where is the disconnect? When did the rallying cry of Christian values become anything other than the simple and profound forgiveness of others for their sins against us and against society?

Jesus never once told another person they were a sinner, except to say that their sins had been forgiven. He allowed others, who believed differently, to go their own way. He used stories and parables, and analogies, to try and convince others to act on a faith that was based on forgiveness. He never punished another, and only once did he act with physical intent, flipping over tables in the temple, and driving out the money changers. But that was an exception to the rule: Jesus brought peace to others, Jesus shared the Holy Spirit with others, and commands us to do the same.

Jesus had compassion and understanding for the Gentiles, much to the chagrin of the powers that be in the church at the time. And he commands us to do the same: to have compassion and understanding of those who don't believe, who believe differently than we do, much to the chagrin of those who believe we should condemn non-Christians.

There are some examples of modern-day believers who strive to practice this part of our faith: some of the Amish communities in this country have had to face horrible crimes against some of their most vulnerable members. And the remarkable fact is that these communities find ways to forgive the perpetrator. They allow the wider community to do what is necessary as far as punishment, but they find ways to forgive the very one who has harmed one of their own. Perhaps you've heard of one or two of these instances.

The civic processes of arrest, prosecution, and punishment will happen, as they should. If we didn't have those processes, our world would descend into chaos. But *we* can find ways to let peace be with us, to receive the Holy Spirit, and to look for ways to forgive the sins of others. Those in our lives, and those in the wider community. Just as God sent Jesus, Jesus sends us.

I know it might seem unconventional, but I'd like us to take a moment, right now, to share the peace of Christ with each other. And when we say Peace be with you, or And also with you, let us recognize that we are also saying, receive the Holy Spirit, forgive others. Because our Holy Scripture for this morning tells us exactly that. Given the colds and flus that are going around, you need not shake hands or hug if you do not wish to do so, but please let us share the peace of Christ with each other in the next few moments: Peace be with you!

(If you are reading this because you could not attend worship, then please find a time to share the peace of Christ with another person whenever that is convenient.)

Now, that was the easy part. It's true. It's easy to wish another person peace, especially if they are sitting near you in church! The hard part is going out into the world to be agents of forgiveness. And that is what we are commissioned to do: forgive the sins of others, so that they may be forgiven. Retaining the sins of others leads to our own pain, our own hurts. So I imagine we would want to do that sparingly!

Having shared the peace of Christ, let us go from here understanding that as God sent Jesus, Jesus sends us. And having received the Holy Spirit, let us go from here understanding that we are the agents of forgiveness that Jesus sends out into the world. Equipped with Peace and the Holy Spirit, let's go out into the world to do what we have been sent to do: forgive. Amen.